



Remappings of a Region: Popular Map Images Around and Beyond ‘Southeast Asia’

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Abstract. Our spatial understandings and perceptions are augmented by media representations of spaces. Whilst maps are often studied within the academic fields of geography and art history, their discussion within the context of design and design history remains insufficient. This paper delves into the study of popular maps as cross-cultural design artefacts. This is done through case studies from the perspective of graphic communication, analyzing maps along their symbolic, narrative, and discursive interpretations as well as how they interplay with lived experiences. The period from 1930s to the 1960s saw several events that led to frequent remappings of geo-entities around the loose assemblage of nations that we now know as Southeast Asia, which included the birth of new nations and the forging of alliances. This process of repeated remappings enables an interesting study on the nature of maps, their instrumentalization, and their consumption.

Keywords: *design history; maps; politics of space; popular maps; Southeast Asia.*

1 Introduction

In *Siam Mapped* [1], Thongchai Winichakul argues that maps as a technology of space have wide-ranging impacts in the epistemological and socio-political domains. In the present day, maps are a commonly perused form of information and communication. We regularly consume maps; consequently our spatial understandings and perceptions are augmented by these media representations of spaces. The earliest maps were autonomous objects designed for the purpose of recording spaces, but eventually maps were also used as popular imageries for a range of purposes, such as education, advertising, or games. By studying popular maps, we can understand the complex ways in which they interplay with lived experiences and the geographical imagination.

This research was interested in studying popular maps as cross-cultural design artefacts that document historical alliances amongst nations and geo-bodies. It considered alliances and regional notions around ‘Southeast Asia’, including ‘Afro-Asian’, ‘Greater Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere’, ‘Nanyang’ and ‘Malaya’.

These notions are at times strongly disputed and at times mooted as models of cooperation or shared heritage.

2 Methodology

As a design historical analysis of popular maps, this study addressed the following research question: What do these popular maps communicate and how do they construct ways of seeing and knowing the world? How did the context of reception affect the interpretation of these popular maps?

There have been debates and criticisms on design historical approaches in recent years that led to a growing scholarship of design history beyond the Western canon. Kjetil Fallan and Grace Lees Maffei acknowledge design as global, regional and local; this leads to the need to reexamine discourses, which could be spurred by postcolonial theory and the current focus on sustainability [2]. Kjetil Fallan also argued for approaching design history as cultural history. This paradigm conceptualizes culture as a dynamic process, conditioned by complex interactions of historical developments, identity formation and competing narratives [3].

Building on the paradigm of design history as cultural history, this project framed a graphical communication analysis of four selected maps, which included formal, sociological, and discursive analysis, while considering modes of production and labor, cultural, and political contexts as well as competing narratives.

2.1 Selection of Maps

Design historian Kjetil Fallan has noted that “design culture is not elite culture, but everyday culture, and it is best explored through historical analysis” [3]. The study of maps as an everyday object suits the aims and strengths of a design historical approach. Furthermore, this paper selected maps that were created to communicate messages to a large target audience. They may have been showcased in highly visible and crowded places or were printed in large numbers for dissemination. Conversely, maps that come in the form of exclusive information, such as military maps or limited-edition prints, were excluded from this paper.

Regarding the time period and location, the study chose maps of the region of Southeast Asia from around the 1930s to the 1960s. This period saw several events that led to frequent remappings of geo-entities around the loose grouping of nations that we now know as Southeast Asia. Some of the events that precipitated these remappings include World War 2, the Cold War as well as the

birth of numerous new nations that were foregrounded by growing postcolonial nationalism after the war. This process of repeated remappings enables an interesting study on the nature of maps, their instrumentalization, and their consumption.

2.2 Graphical Communication Analysis of Maps

Maps become culturally pertinent when their modes of communication are deconstructed and critically studied. This study approached the case study maps according to their iconography, narrative, and power-knowledge; these three components form the design and communication analysis in this paper.

2.2.1 Iconography and Signs

Maps communicate symbolically through a system of signs and indexical elements [4, 5]. Signs are different from the objects referred to; this means that maps are not equivalent to reality but communicate information or messages based on an interpretation of reality.

Signs, icons and symbols are culturally specific; they are only able to be deciphered by individuals who hold a common set of contextual knowledge, enabling them to share the codes “which govern the relationship of translation between them” [6]. Similarly, although some maps appear neutral and universal, they are highly specific modes of communication with particular worldviews.

Maps that indicate bounded geo-bodies, such as maps of nations, are further loaded with connotations of imagined communities, culture, and sense of identity. As these maps of special geo-bodies become recognizable in popular consciousness, they retain meaning even without other signs that tie them to reality, for instance, scale and coordinates. In the words of Thongchai Winichakul, “A map may float” [1]. The map becomes, in Barthes’ term, a “second order semiological system” or a “metasign” [7, 1], loaded with meanings and values beyond the space they represent. The map thus becomes instrumental to geo-political discourses.

2.2.2 Narrative Geographies

Maps communicate through a composition of graphic elements so they can convey ideas in ordered hierarchy and sequence, becoming a narrative form. In *Visual Explanations*, Edward Tufte explores how diagrams, including spatial diagrams and maps, construct explanations and communicate narratives. He proposes the term ‘confections’ as an assembly of visual events that may occur within the same story or even from different ‘streams of story’. He explains that “by means of a multiplicity of image-events, confections illustrate an argument,

present and enforce visual comparisons, combine the real and the imagined, and tell us yet another story” [8].

Confections, often found in maps, suggest contemporaneous events and allow us to imagine the experience of others within the visual narrative. Maps allow us to position ourselves within them. This quality lends itself to imaginative interpretations, for example, in board games or travel posters, further contributing to the discursive potency of maps.

2.2.3 Instruments of Power

Maps are often instrumentalized as power/knowledge within national discourses. This is an argument that has been explored by prominent geographers and historians, who often refer to Foucault’s critical concept of the regime of truth [1, 5, 9]. In *Discipline and Punish* [10], Foucault argues that knowledge and truth are not neutral but rather shaped and produced by power relations in society. The regime of truth governs and determines what counts as knowledge, what is considered credible, and how truth is established and maintained within a society.

Both Thongchai Winichakul [1] and Benedict Anderson [9] illustrate the importance of maps in contributing towards national awareness and the ongoing process of nation-building. Maps constitute rich symbolic discourses ready to be called upon for various communicative purposes. Furthermore, the quest for accuracy in maps through measurement methods can be seen as part of a function of truth claim that uses the language of empiricism [5]. This claim has been so successful that presently the Mercator’s projection and its variations remain as the most recognizable mode of geographical map.

3 Remappings of a Region

This section analyses the case studies of selected popular maps in a period of burgeoning postcolonial nationalisms around Southeast Asia.

3.1 The Land and its People

Two popular maps illustrate the transformation of geo-bodies and their imagined communities, appealing to two different perspectives: the colonial tourism audiences and citizens of a newly formed nation. The first map (Figure 1) comes in the form of a 1930s travel poster produced during the colonial rule of British Malaya, also known as the Federated Malay States. The second map (Figure 2) comes in the form of an advertisement that was created on the occasion of Malaysia’s national independence in 1963.

The bounded geo-body of Malaya, which includes both Peninsular Malaysia and Singapore, today is seen as something from the past – a memory from whence both the hegemonic nations of Singapore and Malaysia have decisively moved on. Singapore, now an independent state, was once part of the geo-body that was ‘Malaya’ and ‘Malaysia’. Both names have been used through changing historical and political contexts, coming into circulation as early as the 19th century, appearing in early natural history studies, such as Alfred Russell Wallace’s *The Malay Archipelago* in 1869. Officially, colonial boundaries were defined through the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824 and the Anglo-Siamese Treaty of 1909. In 1963, ‘Malaysia’ was used for the new independent nation enlarged from Malaya. Recalling this initial merger and national independence in 1963, historian Hong Lysa notes the complex symbolisms and sentiments amongst Singaporeans that were attributed to the long memory of this geographical connectedness [11].

Both artefacts are exemplary of how maps are used as a form of marketing graphic within their own socio-historical contexts.

The ‘Visit Malaya’ poster was published by the Federated Malay States Railways as part of tourism advertising coordinated by the Malay States Information Agency [12]. It targeted visitors who arrived at the ports of Penang or Singapore, where passengers travelling from Europe or North America were suggested to break their journey at the port of Penang, travelling through the Federated Malay States before rejoining their steamer ship in Singapore.

The Aji-No-Moto advertisement was printed as the back cover of *Mastika*, a popular and long-running Malay language magazine circulated in Malaysia and Singapore. The publisher, *Utusan Melayu*, first issued the magazine in Singapore in 1941, before moving to Kuala Lumpur in 1958. *Mastika*’s contents revolved around literature, current affairs, and discussions of nationalism. Both the large-format poster and the full-page advertisement show significant marketing investments and considerable design virtuosity. However, they are not unprecedented and in fact they were of interest to this study because they made use of graphic languages that were commonplace enough at the time to be clearly understood by their audiences.

The two maps utilize the narrative of the nation and its people. Benedict Anderson notes that the national census and the national map are two important institutions of power-knowledge that were initially deployed as instruments of control by the colonial powers to gain useful information over the land and the people they rule over. However these devices were readily appropriated by post-colonial, official nationalisms [9]. The two maps featured in this section

illustrate this shift, mainly being examples of the map as a metasign and the depiction of ‘the people’ along the ideology of the census.

The 19th century colonial census took the form of a written report that served to categorize, in very general and limited terms, the imagination of the others, as well as to quantify the population under colonial control. Simplicity is key and the census is often intolerant of existing heterogeneities that naturally occur amongst culturally diverse groups of native populations and immigrants. The two posters show a lineage from the ideologies of the census, where the depiction of human forms is not meant to relate to any specific person but to symbolically represent a population.

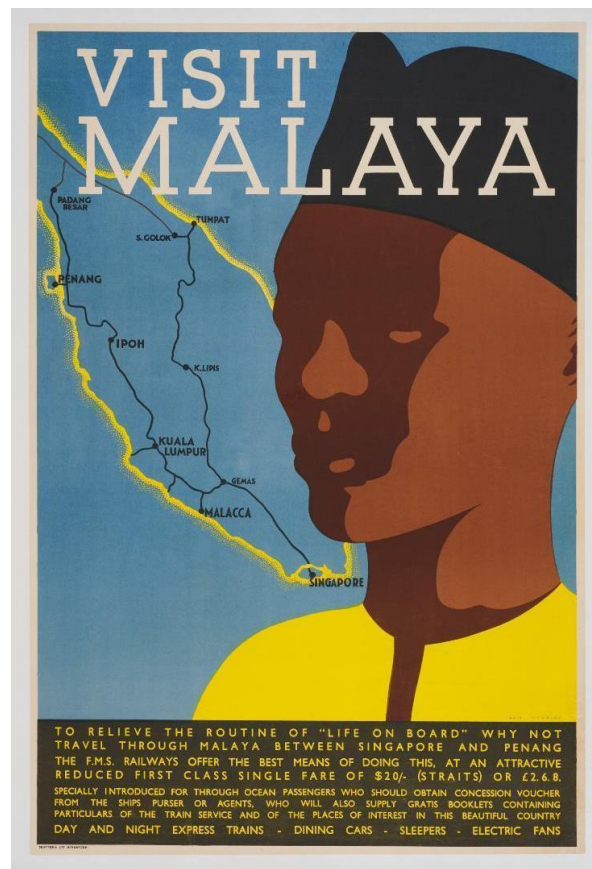


Figure 1 Poster published by the Federated Malay States Railways around 1930 to promote its services to tourists as an alternative to sea travel. Image courtesy of National Heritage Board, Collection of the National Museum of Singapore [13].



Figure 2 Print advertisement of the seasoning Aji-No-Moto published in the September 1963 issue of the magazine *Mastika*. Image courtesy of Malaysian Design Archive [14].

The 1930s poster (Figure 1) shows a human figure depicted in the foreground, representing the people of Malaya whose map forms the background. The target audience of this map were not the people of Malaya, who may not have appreciated this arbitrary depiction of a categorical identity. It was meant to be seen by a foreign audience, who were unfamiliar with this place and culture.

The illustration turns the persona almost into a phantom-like character, generalizing and eradicating his individual personality, eliminating details such as eyes, lips, and hair. The character is identified by the color of his skin, headgear, and collar, which indicate ethnic garments. Remarkably, a tension forms between anonymity and character – the persona seems at the cusp of asserting himself through minimum shapes and colors.

In the 1963 advertisement (Figure 2), a group of people similarly features in the foreground as ornament. Grouped together as ‘the masses’, they are given

complete expressions and details such as different ethnic clothing. They are depicted in monotone blue, the same color of the background and the empty space of the ocean, with only the Malaysian flags they hold being differently colored to highlight its momentous symbolism. This color usage adjusts the impact of the human forms in order to balance the composition and maintain the hierarchical clarity of the poster.

The tagline at the top of the poster written in Jawi script, which is read from left to right, can be translated as: “Aside from the birth of Malaysia, don’t forget... Ajinomoto”. This tagline first pays deference to celebrating the birth of the nation before moving towards the central message to promote the brand Aji-no-Moto. Compared to the singular depiction of the identity in the 1930 poster, the masses in Figure 2 have lost their visual impact as individuals. Singularly they are forgettable; they are only meaningful as a symbol of the new imagined Malaysian community.

Both the 1930 and the 1963 poster maps have eliminated many of the conventions that link maps to reality, such as scale and accuracy. Utilized as motifs, the maps take on a symbolic role: in the first depiction, Malaya can be read as an exotic travel destination, an object. In the second depiction, Malaysia is depicted as having triumphed as a new nation and is now looking towards the future. The progressive symbolization of the maps results in the map-as-logo. This has a pervasive impact, as described by Benedict Anderson: “In this shape, the map entered an infinitely reproducible series, available for transfer to posters, official seals, letterheads, magazine and textbook covers, tablecloths, and hotel walls. Instantly recognizable, everywhere visible, the logo-map penetrated deep into the popular imagination, forming a powerful emblem for the anti-colonial nationalisms being born” [9].

Both artefacts made use of maps as a symbolic motif to promote commercial interests. As such, these visuals are not meant to be radical in their own right but rather form a part of an everyday visual culture that is normative and recognizable. Present-day audiences may note and critique the perceptible cultural essentialism shown in the 1930s poster and to a certain extent the 1963 advertisement, but unfortunately this visual language is not limited to specific designers or designed objects. Popular maps are compelling and ingenious and often carry underlying world views that can be troubling, as the analysis of the next popular map will also show.

3.2 Travel and Imagination as Inflected Narrative of Imperialism

The case study presented in this section shows a curious effect of maps: in being presented a mediation of space, we are often compelled to locate and

imagine ourselves within the map. Successfully getting one foot through the door, the map becomes a pathway to fictional imaginings. This is a device that is used time and again in stories and games.

The third map comes in the form of a Japanese board game that is played with dice, titled 双六大東亞共榮圏めぐり:新年號附録 (Sugoroku Dai Tōa Kyōeiken meguri: Shinnengō furoku) (Figure 3). Sugoroku means ‘double six’ referring to the highest value a set of two dice can produce; it also refers to similar board games that require dice to play. This particular Sugoroku was printed in 1944 as a children’s supplement for the magazine *Ie no Hikari*, one of the oldest and most popular magazines in Japan, which is still running today. The magazine had a huge following of up to 1 million people from 1935 to 1944 [15]. It contained articles on agriculture, home economics, daily life, stories, and a children’s section.



Figure 3 双六大東亞共榮圏めぐり: 新年號附録 (Sugoroku Dai Tōa Kyōeiken meguri: Shinnengō furoku), a Japanese board game played with dice, printed in 1944. Image courtesy of National Library, Singapore, Lim Shao Bin Collection [16].

Between 1939 and 1945 a number of Japanese propaganda items were produced, many of which contained maps. *Sugoroku Dai Tōa Kyōeiken meguri* contains the map of the Greater East Asia Co-Prospersity Sphere, a term used by Japan to describe its annexed territories and its expansionist imperialist vision during World War 2. Through the game, Japanese children could learn about the

territories included in this sphere. The Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere was also intended as a new order envisioned to replace western colonialism. Using the slogan ‘Asia for Asians’, Japan utilized a racialized discourse to promote its own hegemony over the region. This discourse has since come under severe criticism, especially considering the lived experiences of the people in the countries occupied by the Japanese who were exploited and subjected to the horrors of war.

The cheerfully illustrated board game attempts to sidestep the morbidities of war. Disturbing as this is, Japan was not the only nation who produced gamified propaganda of conquests. For instance, *La Conquista dell’Abissinia* (Figure 4), created and produced in 1936 by pharmaceutical company Carlo Erba, is a game that represents the Italian invasion of Abyssinia (also known as the Ethiopian Empire) between 1935 and 1936. The gamification of conquest associated imperialism with ideas of travel and exploration, effectively distancing it from violence, especially in the eyes of the games’ audience, who were often children.

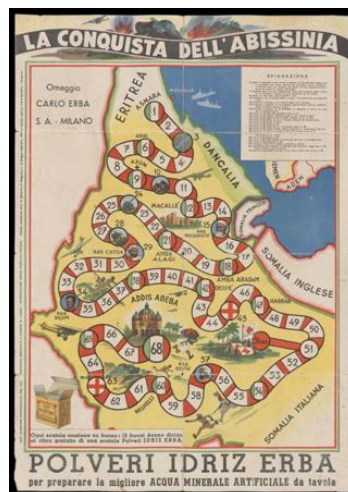


Figure 4 ‘La conquista dell’Abissinia’ (The conquest of Abyssinia), created by Officine dell’Istituto Italiano d’Arti Grafiche (Office of the Italian Institute of Graphic Arts). This is a paper board game that represents the Italian invasion of Abyssinia (also known as the Ethiopian Empire) between 1935 and 1936 [17].

In *Sugoroku Dai Tōa Kyōeiken meguri* (Figure 3), a little boy with a backpack and a green hat is portrayed as the main protagonist of the game. He can be seen travelling through the map and coming back to Japan at the end of the game. He starts at the Tokyo Station on the top right side of the map and travels towards the west of Japan before moving on to China by sea travel.

Different modes of transportation are illustrated. In some spaces, the player would be able to move forward quickly. For instance, if at the start the player had rolled a 1 on the dice, he/she would be able to proceed via airplane to Nanjing. At times the travel can be disrupted by events marked by triangular spaces, warning signs of obstructions, such as a storm, that would require the player to go back a few spaces.

Another visual device are the places of interest highlighted by zooming in. Each site had its own illustrated snippets that often portrayed favorable narratives of Japan. For instance, Singapore is highlighted by a view of the bustling port and the Syonan Jinja shrine, which commemorates Japanese soldiers who perished in the battles of Malaya and Sumatra.

Sugoroku Dai Tōa Kyōeiken megori is an example of a troubling instrumentalization of maps, not only because of its subject matter and portrayal, but also because of the potential of maps in repackaging narratives.

3.3 Placing on the Map as Diplomatic Theatre

From 19 April to 24 April 1955, the first Asian African Conference, also known as the Bandung Conference or KAA, was held in the city of Bandung, Indonesia. Representatives from twenty-nine governments were gathered to discuss cultural and economic cooperation, the role of the Third World in the Cold War, and to oppose imperialism or neo-colonialism. Around the time of the conference, decolonization was underway and every few months a new nation in Africa or Asia emerged and needed to be integrated into the international system.

Near the exhibition venue, a large billboard displayed a map that featured the participating nations (Figure 5). It is articulated as a simplified Mercator projection map. The national boundaries of participating countries are shown, but the boundaries of other non-participating nations were not drawn. Furthermore, the map zooms in on the region of Asia and Africa, excluding the North and South Poles, Europe, North and South America. The words 'Asia' and 'Afrika' on the map stand out conspicuously, emphasizing the depiction of Asia and Africa as continuous and related entities.



Figure 5 A billboard with a map of participating nations in the Afro-Asian Conference 1955, Bandung [18].

Writing about the KAA, historian Naoko Shimazu has proposed an interpretive framework that “re-cast[s] the conference as a theatrical performance, in which actors performed on the stage to audiences” [19]. This framework presents the city of Bandung as a theatrical space. Notably, the city underwent a process of transformation, which included renovation works and renaming of major colonial buildings along the line of the new official nationalism. An example of this is the renaming of the former Dutch colonial clubhouse Sociëteit Concordia to Gedung Merdeka, or Freedom Building.

The map can thus be interpreted as part of the efforts of ‘staging the city’ at a time and place where symbolisms and performances were pervasively manifested. The conference objective, listed under the map, served as an affirmation of the common goals of the participating nations. The billboard map can be seen as a backdrop against which residents of the city became both audience and performers as they were drawn into special moments of KAA such as the ‘Merdeka Walk’, which in Shimazu’s words was also a “historical pageant, symbolizing the coming of age of Asia and Africa” [19].

4 Conclusion

This study attempted to analyze several case studies of popular maps that pertain to the general region of Southeast Asia in a period of national awakenings. The analyses of these popular maps yielded not only an abundance of information but also pluriversal design historical narratives of the region. The instances of remappings that happen across the analyzed maps are accompanied by highly charged emotions. Their memories are often complex, deemed important by some and eagerly forgotten by others. Maps continuously shape our understanding of the place we call home in connection to our neighbors and the world at large; ultimately their study also calls to mind issues on the ways we demarcate design cultures through the discourses of our nation and its region.

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